

# The Decision to Marry: Examining Evidence from German Court Cases

## By Lily Chadwick

In Germany during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth-century, ideas about marriage were changing. Men and women began to marry for a variety of different reasons such as personality compatibility and mutual affection in addition to traditional wealth and status considerations. In some German states, engaged couples were required to record the possessions they brought into the union. Additionally, marital disputes at this time were sometimes brought before a court and recorded there. Modern historians can better understand marriage practices in Germany 250 years ago by examining records such as these. For the purposes of this project, three different records from three different social classes were transcribed, translated, and interpreted to show the different factors influencing marriages of this time. The summaries of these records are given below in addition to further analyses of the various motivations to marry during this time.

### The Case of a Poor Servant Girl Archival Number A364L Bü649

This record tells the story of a poor woman named Dorothea Kromerin who asked the law for intervention in a dispute over a broken engagement and a pregnancy out of wedlock.

- Dorothea Kromerin was a poor servant girl from Schwabbach.
- Dorothea became pregnant out of wedlock 3 years prior to her court plea.
- The father of her child was named Philipp Gentner, a journeyman weaver from Bissingen.
- Dorothea claims Gentner promised to marry her and then promptly disappeared.
- She could not support both her newborn son and herself on her salary.
- Dorothea brought her case against Gentner before the city court to demand alimony.
- The demand specifically called for payment for the cost of childbirth as well as child support until her son turned 14



*The Scullery Maid.* Jean-Baptiste Siméon Chardin, 1738.

### The Coppersmiths of Wildberg Archival Number A573 Bü4855

The inventory provided for the union between Johann Fridrich Frizen, a copper smith, and Maria Katharina, born a Pistorin, was relatively simple.

- Religion was important to this couple considering the books in their possession were predominantly prayer, sermon, or song books.
- The most expensive objects in their possession were the hand tools Johann inherited from his father
- Johann brought only 3 shirts, a pair of pants, and a few other clothing items of which the most valuable was a velvet vest.
- Maria's wardrobe only consisted of a few different skirts, shirts, and two pairs of shoes.
- Johann's inventory was listed to be worth a total of 274fl 20k.,\*\* 260fl of which was given to Johann by his parents. The only items noted to be his own were a few pieces of clothing.
- Maria's inventory was listed to be worth a total of 70fl 9k., of which 65fl 32k. she earned by herself. The remainder was her dowry which consisted of a few pieces of furniture.
- The only other categories of inventory listed were weapons, bedding, and linens.



Image from *Weben und Überleben in Laichingen 1650-1900*, Hans Medick, pg. 408-409. Göttingen, 1997.

### The Professor from Tübingen and His Bride *This information comes from an inventory transcribed and translated by Eric Roubinek* Archival Number A275 Bü145

The inventory from the marriage between David Christoph Seybold, a professor and dean, and Charlotte Fredericke, born a Keller, provides an example of a match between two elite and wealthy individuals.

- David did not own any real estate, but he did own an extensive amount of books worth 1012fl.
- The wardrobes of this couple were quite impressive with a variety of jackets, stockings, undershirts, breeches, caps, skirts, aprons, stockings, gloves, shoes, and bonnets in a variety of different fabrics including wool, silk, and linen.
- Only some of David's possessions were listed to be his own, as his family provided most of his inventory.
- The other categories reported were bedding, linens, jewelry and silvers, books, cash, wines and drinks, furniture, financial assets/ investments, and dishes of various materials.
- David's total inventory was worth 3136fl 8k, and Charlotte's was worth 2969fl 24k, listed together as a total of an impressive 6130fl 32k (possible slight addition error on behalf of the recorder)



*Portrait der Wilhelmine von Cotta.* Christian Gottlieb Schick, 1802. Image from *Weben und Überleben in Laichingen 1650-1900*, Hans Medick, pg. 438-439. Göttingen, 1997.

### Class Comparison

Money, social status, and parental influence were significant motivating factors behind these unions, but to what degree they were influential in these different relationships and classes is important to investigate.

- Marriage in Dorothea's case was primarily important for survival reasons given that her low income was insufficient to support her and her son. In contrast, the copper smith from Wildberg, the professor from Tübingen, and their wives all had access to financial support or were able to support themselves outside of marriage.
- In the case of Johann and Maria from Wildberg, it appears that the lower financial status of Maria did not deter the couple from marrying. This may not have been so in the case of the extravagantly rich David and Charlotte from Tübingen, where their relatively equal inventories and vast amounts of wealth would imply financial and social status were important.
- Parental influence was important in the marriages from Wildberg and Tübingen. Given the amount of inventory supplied by parents in both unions, it seems likely that they played a significant role in arranging the unions

### Notes on German Currency

German currency at this time was given in florins and kreuzers, like dollars and cents in the US. To put the monetary figures stated here in perspective, the poor population with no farm property in the late 1700s had around 700fl., those who owned a small amount of property had about 1200fl, and middle class peasants had roughly 2000fl.\*

\*Source: *Weben und Überleben in Laichingen 1650-1900*, Hans Medick, pg. 232.

### Connections to Today

- Unfortunately, there are still cases today where single parents cannot support their children on their own, and must demand legal intervention to acquire child support, as was the case with Dorothea Kromerin.
- To many couples, factors such as mutual affection and attraction are more important than financial or social status in deciding who to marry. This is shown in the case presented by Johann and Maria from Wildberg.
- There are also couples who decided to marry based on class and financial situation, as was most likely the case with David and Charlotte from Tübingen.

Some people today choose to marry for money, others for social status or power, and many for mutual affection and compatibility. By examining records such as these, historians may better understand those who came before us, and how and why they made the decision to marry. In the process, we may find that their reasons were not all that different from those found in the modern day.

### Bibliography

- Primary Sources:**
- Hauptstaatsarchiv Stuttgart. Document #s A364L Bü649, A573 Bü4855, and A275 Bü145.
- Secondary Sources:**
- Hufton, Olwen, *The Prospect Before Her: A History of Women in Western Europe 1500 - 1800* (New York: Vintage, 1998)
  - Maynes, Mary Jo, "Girlhood in Modern European History. (Proto-)Industrialisation, Consumption, Marriage, and Selfhood, ca. 1750-1900." Contribution to the web-feature "European history – gender history". In: *Themenportal Europäische Geschichte* (2009), URL: <http://www.europa.clio-online.de/2009/Article=405>.
  - Medick, Hans, *Weben und Überleben in Laichingen 1650-1900. Lokalgeschichte als Allgemeine Geschichte*, 2nd. ed. (Göttingen 1997).
- Additional Images**
- Chardin, Jean-Baptiste-Siméon. *The Scullery Maid*. 1738. *Jean-Baptiste-Siméon Chardin The Complete Works*. 2002. Web. 11 Apr. 2015. <http://www.jean-baptiste-simeon-chardin.org/The-Scullery-Maid,-1738.html>.

### Influencing Factors of Marriage

- Dorothea wanted justice for Philipp's broken promises and support for her child.
- Dorothea did not ask the court to force Philipp to marry her.
- Dorothea asked for payment for child support until her son was 14, or presumably old enough to work and support himself.
- Dorothea also asked for compensation for previous costs involving the child.
- Dorothea felt these payments were justified given the wrong done to her.

It is important to note that Dorothea originally wanted this union, because she needed additional help in raising her son. Therefore, the court record from her case suggests that to Dorothea this marriage was a means of financial support for her and her son.

### Influencing Factors of Marriage

- The amount of inventory supplied by the parents of Johann indicates they played a substantial role in arranging the union.
- Maria's inventory was worth almost 1/4 of her husband's, but she earned most of what she owned. This implies she was able to work her way up high enough in the social hierarchy to negotiate an agreement with Johann and his family to form this unequal match, or that the couple was willing to overlook the financial inequality and marry based on mutual attraction.
- The tools Johann inherited from his parents most likely allowed this couple to establish his trade as a coppersmith and therefore a means by which to financially support their modest household.

Overall, both the financial inequality of the match and Maria's ability to earn almost all of her possessions were highly unusual circumstances. Therefore, it may be that this marriage was not influenced by the financial status of the partners. Instead, the union may have been arranged by a mixture of parental approval and mutual attraction.

### Influencing Factors of Marriage

- The extensive amount of extravagant clothing David and Charlotte owned implies that appearances were important
- The relatively equal worth of their inventories suggests that it was important to this couple that each partner come from the same financial class.
- Only a select few pieces of David's clothing are listed as his own because his family was able to supply his possessions for him.
- The various dishes, amounts of jewelry and silver, wine, and other luxuries listed as categories in the inventories of David and Charlotte indicate that access to pleasure and comfort were important.

It is apparent pleasure and appearance were important to this couple and their families, and it is likely that this match was made in consideration of factors such as the financial suitability and social status of the partners.